



The Sabal

www.nativeplantproject.org

Native Citrus Trees of the Lower Rio Grande Valley

by Martin Hagne
Executive Director
Valley Nature Center

Many people living or visiting the Valley believe that orange, grapefruit, and lemon trees are native to the area. That is a romantic notion but, unfortunately, not true. There are several stories on how our fruiting citrus trees arrived, with a likely source being Spanish priests. But don't despair as the story about native citrus does not end that abruptly.

There are six trees and shrubs belonging to the Rutaceae, or citrus, family that are native to this area. There is also one small perennial herb called Dutchman's Breeches, but let's focus on the five woody plants. The sixth, the Tickle

Tongue, has only been found in small numbers just south of the Willacy county northern line. Granted, none bear fruit as we would know citrus fruit. These plants produce small berries or seed pods. I know birds eat the berries on three species, but I am sure wildlife use all five as food at times. If you crush the leaves on these species you will smell a very distinct citrus odor.

Most are thornless species, with shiny dark green leaves and all can be used as very attractive ornamentals in landscaping. They do vary widely in size and shape, and growth habit and leaves. The group as a whole is mostly not well known by the general public, and only two species are known well by people using native plants as landscaping. The other three are very rare in the wild here in the Valley. Let's take a brief look at each species, starting with the most common and working to the rarest.



Esenbeckia runyonii, or Jopoy, as a mature tree, and close-up of the waxy, smooth, attractive leaves and the showy flowers.

Colima, *Zanthoxylum fagara*, also known as Lime Prickly Ash and Una de Gato, has a very distinct leaf structure. The petioles, where the leaflets are attached, are winged, and many small oval or roundish leaflets are attached on both sides. This gives it more of a feathery mimosa feel with the small leaves. This species grows more in a large shrub form rather than a straight tree and can grow up to 27 feet tall. It produces small yellowish green flowers and often large clusters of tiny black seeds covered by a thin brown cover. This is the only species with thorns, and it is well armed with small catclaw like thorns. Besides having thorns, it is a wonderful addition to a yardscape and certainly a must for a re-vegetation area. Its sweet flowers attract nectaring butterflies, and it is the host plant for the largest butterfly in North America, the Giant Swallowtail.

Next in line comes the Texas Torchwood, *Amyris texana*, or Chapotillo. This small shrub grows up to five feet tall and can be shaped into a hedge or left alone to form a nice rounded shrub. Its shiny leaves grow trifoliate, or three to a set, and have somewhat of a wrinkled appearance at times. Its fairly small flowers are greenish white, and it produces small clusters of shiny black berries that bird and other mammals love. It can tolerate a moderate amount of dappled shade as well as full sun. The name “torchwood” refers to the fact that the wood ignites easily due to its “oily” nature, and that you should be able to use its branches as a torch.

The Sierra Madre Torchwood, *Amyris madrensis*, a.k.a. Mountain Torchwood, extends no further north than into the Valley, and it is not that common here. It can be hard to find in the wild here, and its habitat is quickly disappearing. It is somewhat of a mix between a tree and a shrub and grows fairly erect, although

with many branches. It can reach at least nine feet tall. It has opposite and compound leaves with five or more leaflets. Rain brings out its flowers, which are green or white, followed by a pea-size black berry that the birds can't resist. It is a beautiful landscaping plant with its silvery white trunk and stems and can handle dry conditions as well as full sun.

The only reliable place that we can find stands of the Barreta tree, *Helietta parvifolia*, is in Starr County east of Rio Grande City along the hillsides just south of US Hwy 83. This small eco-region is called the Barretal. Sadly, large parts of the already small area are being turned into subdivisions and “ranchettes,” making this species threatened with extinction within the U.S. This gorgeous small tree can reach up to 12 feet but can be affected by our infrequent freezes. It normally survives but freezes back, sometimes all the way to the ground. Its inch-long oval leaves are almost waxy. Like so many of the other native citrus species its flowers are greenish white and flowers in small loose clusters. Its fruits are dry and shaped into three or four wing-shaped segments with one seed each. I hope more people “find” this plant and use it in landscaping and re-vegetation efforts.

The rarest of the five species has been labeled “the rarest tree in the U.S.” *Esenbeckia*, *Esenbeckia runyonii*, or Jopoy, is truly rare in the wild on this side of the border. Further south in Mexico it thrives and grows over 70 feet tall along clear rivers and mountain hillsides. Here we only know of a few wild specimens in Cameron County. It was thought to be extirpated from the U.S. until these trees were found. Books label it as a small tree growing up to 18 feet tall, but I have seen much larger trees than that. It seems to produce fruit once every two years or so and only for a short time in the fall. Its seed are found inside a normally



Texas Torchwood
Amyris texana
trifoliate, aromatic leaf



Texas Torchwood above in bloom, and left in fruit. Photos on pages 4 and 5 submitted by Christina Mild.

Colima, Lime Prickly Ash
Zanthoxylum fagara
compound leaf, wide rachis
hooked, stipulate spines



Sierra Madre (Mountain) Torchwood
Amyris madrensis
Aromatic foliage, 5-9 leaflet pairs. Black fruit.
Slender, upright growth, silver-grey, multi-trunked.
Slow to establish, but worth the wait!



five-lobed rounded capsule. The tree was named after famed botanist Robert Runyon, who resided in Brownsville around the turn of the century. There are a few dozen trees that have been planted across the Valley in yards and nature preserves, so hopefully the species can survive north of the border.

Although some of these species are hard to find in cultivation, many can be found if you visit a true native plant nursery. The Valley

Nature Center keeps a list of the few such nurseries, and also sells native plants. Please give us a call or come visit for assistance. You can find us on the web at www.valleynaturecenter.org or call 956-969-2475. Enjoy these citrus plants!

Martin Hagne is President of the Native Plant project in addition to being Executive Director of the Valley Nature Center, 301 S. Border Ave. Weslaco, Texas 78596



Barreta
Helieta parvifolia
Aromatic, three leaflets, 3-winged seed



Barreta, *Helieta parvifolia*
Aromatic foliage, trifoliolate leaf.
Threatened, found on upper reaches
of caliche hills in Starr County.
Grows well in cultivation.

Nature Happenings Lower Rio Grande Valley, Texas

For a comprehensive calendar of Nature Happenings go to **RGV Nature Coalition** at www.rgvnaturecoalition.org Scroll down to and click on Nature Events Calendar on right side.

Edinburg Scenic Wetlands and World Birding Center — Birding, butterflies, caterpillars, bats, and photography programs, 714 Raul Longoria Rd., Edinburg, TX.
Call Marisa (956) 381-9922 or go to www.edinburgwbc.org for schedule.

Quinta Mazatlan - McAllen Wing of the World Birding Center— 600 Sunset Ave., McAllen, TX. Call Colleen Hook (956) 688-3370 for scheduled events.

Bentsen Rio Grande Valley State Park WBC offers butterfly walks, bird walks, nature tours. Call 956-584-9156 for details and times.

Santa Ana NWR near Alamo offers **Nature Tram rides** with Interpreters at 9:30 a.m., 12 noon and 2:00 p.m. every day (956) 784-7500.

Valley Nature Center (956) 969-2475 301 S. Border Ave., Weslaco, TX.

Estero Llano Grande State Park WBC - 3301 International Blvd. (FM 1015) in Weslaco, TX. Call (956) 565-3919 for scheduled events.

Valley Proud Environmental Council from bagging grass clippings to Captain Crab puppet shows. Call Laura Maxwell (956) 412-8004, vpec@sbcglobal.net or visit www.valleyproud.org.

The Native Plant Project thanks the following members for staffing the NPP booth at the Butterfly and Birding Festivals Diann Ballesteros, Sue Griffin, Gene Lester, Sande Martin, Christian Mild, Eleanor Mosimann, Kathy Sheldon, Stan Sterba, Susan Thompson, Ann Vacek, Maryann Wingert, Chris Hathcock, and Bert Wessling. And Mike Heep for the native plants.

MOTHER NATURE'S CREATIONS

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The Sabal is the Newsletter of the Native Plant Project and conveys information on the native habitat, and environment of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Texas. Co-editors: Gene Lester and Eleanor Mosimann. You are invited to submit articles for *The Sabal*. They can be brief or long. Articles may be edited for length and clarity. Black and white line drawings -- and colored photos or drawings -- with or without accompanying text are encouraged. We will acknowledge all submissions. Please send them, preferable in electronic form - either Word or WordPerfect - to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact **Gene Lester @ 956-682-0549, or g-el1951@sbcglobal.net**

See *The Sabal* and our 5 handbooks on our website:
www.nativeplantproject.org

Board of Directors

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Native Plant Project Annual Membership Application Form

Regular \$15 per year Contributing \$35 per year Lifelong \$250 one time fee per individual. Members are advised of meetings, field trips, and other activities through *The Sabal*. Dues are paid on a calendar year basis. Send checks to Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, Texas 78589.

Name _____

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I wish to receive the *Sabal* at my e-mail address only

New Renewal Address Change

Comments/ suggestions/ speaker recommendations should be sent to: Native Plant Project, P.O. Box 2742, San Juan, TX 78589 or contact G. Lester (956)-682-0549; g-el1951@sbcglobal.net

Native Plant Project Meetings – November 25, 2008. **Board meeting** at 6:30 p.m.; **General meeting** at 7:30 p.m. Chris Best will present “Loss of Grass and Herbaceous Vegetation in the Tamaulipan Ecosystem”. Before Chris became the TX State Botanist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Austin, he worked in the Valley for 16 years with the LRGV NWR. His study of the startling vegetation decline in our area began then. Let’s learn what we can do to reverse this dangerous trend.

Board and General Meetings 2008 and 2009:

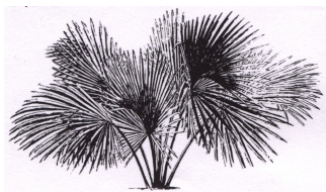
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|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|-------------|----------|
| September 23 | October 28 | 2009: | January 27 | February 24 | March 24 |
| | November 25 | | April 28 | May 26 | |

SUMMARY OF THE MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – OCT 28, 2008

The NPP purchased a display screen to use at festivals. The Board liked the design and colors of the screen. More articles about native plants are needed for *The Sabal*. The pricing of native plants sold at festivals will remain the same.

No December meeting. Happy Thanksgiving and Merry Christmas, too.

Native Plant Project
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San Juan, TX 78589



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